R/V REGINA MARIS

— Ship to Shore News —

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One thing about sailing in the Arctic--it keeps you on the ball. This morning an oil gauge on the main engine let go as we motor-sailed up-wind in 30 knots of breeze and the engine had to be shut down for an hour of repairs. Anywhere else 40 miles off shore, such occasions produce no more than a slight delay. Here, fog and a large iceberg less than a mile dead to leeward complicated matters. The sheets had to be eased promptly, and the helm put up so the ship would sail clear of the danger. Hove to in this wind and sea, she goes to leeward at about 1½ to 2 knots so there's no time for equivocation if we were to stay clear of the breakers crashing menacingly on the weather side of the ice island on our lee.

Our week, once again, has been varied--frustrating too, especially for our Danish scientists. Wind, fog and ice singly or together have made our search for minke whales nearly impossible almost all the time. Monday was our only totally fine day--a day to enjoy Godhavn's hospitality, shops, and spectacular scenery. Shopping for souvenirs and Danish pastries, visiting with old friends and new acquaintances consumed the day for most. My day was largely spent calling Texas about the satellite navigator, and arranging fresh water for the ship with the help of Steig Meuier, a young Danish engineer who with his Greenlander wife, Anna, their 10 day old son, Dennis, and an anthropologist friend from British Columbia first visited the ship a year ago in Godthaab.

We left there after supper in perfect conditions to begin our survey again. This time we saw 4 fin whales feeding off Disko Island's south coast and a minke before the light got too low at about 11 p.m. and we had to stop until 5 a.m. when the light returned. Cloudless skies and a gentle northwest wind allowed us to see one minke, and a finback, plus a lot of seals before we came upon huge rafts of pack ice, which effectively prevented us from returning to Station 3 where we were just a few days ago at the start of the large gale described in the last SEARCHLIGHT. The pack's nearness probably accounted for the very low water and air temperatures we experienced the first night of that gale and the icebergs we dodged that evening were the outriders of the pack itself.

Forced to turn back by the pack ice, we had a nice sail out to the north end of Store Hellefiske Bank where we hove to for the night, seeing no more wildlife except birds on that transect.

The rest of the week was a frustration of fog, calms, pack ice rafts, and northwest winds which blew the fog away only when they were too brisk to permit minke whale spotting. Without the satellite navigator, we had to revert to soundings and dead reckoning to find our position and confirm it as often as possible by sun lines. Doubts in some minds regarding the precision of this approach were dissipated Saturday evening when it guided us with the aid of the radar into the fog shrouded entrance of Itidvleq Fjord where we had aimed our bow to spend a quiet evening at anchor sheltered from 25 knots of cold northwest wind.

Itidvleq Fjord is a favorite dream since our memorable 36 hours anchored at it's head a year ago. Although fogbound for most of our stay, it did clear enough before we left in the late morning yesterday for its grandeur to be revealed, delighting the eyes of both new and return visitors. The new dimension for us was the stream of visitors in small boats that continued most of Saturday night. From the nearby villages of Itidvleq and Holsteinsborg they came--friendly,curious, but shy. They looked and explored everywhere, guided by Mads-Peter with whom most shared the Danish language.

We left those nice people in the sheltering walls of the fjord at noon yesterday and started south against a rising southerly wind. It's still blowing hard southeast, but hopefully the slowly rising glass and brighter sky mean it's coming to an end. It had better if we're going to be in Godthaab as planned tomorrow.

Respectfully submitted,

George Nichols, Jr.
ORV REGINA MARIS

This week has been one of excitement and change. We ended our charter with the Danish Commission for Scientific Research in Greenland, visited Godthaab for two days, spent a fascinating day at the head of a fjord full of lost ruins and reindeer and began our work with humpbacks on the most beautiful day we have had so far in Greenland--Friday the 13th!

Monday morning's gale petered out during the afternoon as they always do and by evening we were making good time again towards Godthaab under sail and power. Our arrival in Godthaab coincided by chance not only with the Queen of Denmark's arrival in her royal yacht, but with the precise instance she disembarked to visit Godthaab for the first time--a visit commemorating Eric the Red's arrival here 1,000 years ago. For a few moments REGINA MARIS stole the show as we sailed close astern of the royal yacht on our way to anchor and received a friendly wave from the queen herself!

Much happened in Godthaab. Finn Larsen and Mads-Peter Heidi-Jorgensen, our Danish scientists, left us as the contract to study minke whales ended on Tuesday the 10th. In retrospect we can claim no great success for the study. Bad weather and ice not only reduced the number of animals seen to a minimum, but also prevented our completing more than 50% of the rather modest transects we had planned. Nevertheless, we did find good friends as everyone was happy with the effort, if not the accomplishment.

Twenty-eight hours after arrival, we left Godthaab for Ameralik Fjord for a day of rest and recreation before beginning the humpback work. Ameralik Fjord stretches into the land near Godthaab Fjord. It's inner reaches were selected nearly a thousand years ago by the north people as a suitable site for farming. A number of farm sites were excavated in the 20's and 30's, revealing many artifacts and much insight into the way of life.

The higher reaches of the fjord are forbidding and austere. Verticle dark rock walls soar 800-1,000 feet on each side, broken only occasionally by steep valleys which rise precipitously to the snow-capped peaks behind. Twenty-five miles in, these suddenly give way to wide, rolling, grass-covered valleys. Each valley has a central stream or river flowing swiftly down over rocks and an occasional waterfall which drains the snow fields and glaciers of the high peaks along the coast on one side and the central massif and ice caps on the other. The temperature in the area is 10-15 degrees F. higher than the coast and the frequency of summer fog is much lower, so there is more sun. In a word, the land and climate are suitable for raising cattle and even raising a little grain as well as hay--this without involving any such climatic change as has been popularly supposed to have made these settlements possible.

We all spent a glorious day exploring despite persistent rain. The North Ruins at Sandenes Farm were still clearly visible and valleys above and behind were filled with reindeer, wildflowers, and blueberries! It is a place where the timeless quality of this remarkable country is especially apparent. Sitting on a ruined wall at Sandenes, one looks out across milky water to rolling moor and soaring snow-dusted peaks and realizes that other people a thousand years ago rested before some of the self-same scenes. It puts wars and cities and inflation and energy policy into a new perspective.

We left reluctantly early on Friday the 13th and motor-sailed out to Fyllas Bank 15 miles off shore in perfect weather, calm and clear. We saw a group of minkes and about 25 to 30 humpbacks all fluking up regularly for the photographers! We stayed 6 hours with them until darkness made pictures impossible and returned for a second day yesterday, having spent Saturday sheltered from gales. Now we explore to the south for humpbacks. So far no luck, but we have only just begun to search.

Respectfully submitted,

George Nichols, Jr.
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